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Lesbian Mothers' Interaction with the Lesbian Community

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LESBIAN MOTHERS' INTERACTION WITH THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY

VICTORIA L. GRIMM

Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of
Master of Social Work

AUGSBURG COLLEGE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

1999

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK
AUGSBURG COLLEGE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Master's Thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement
for the Master of Social Work Degree.

Date of Oral Presentation: May 10, 1999

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ABSTRACT

LESBIAN MOTHERS' INTERACTION WITH THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

VICTORIA L. GRIMM

May 10, 1999

Empirical evidence dating back almost 30 years shows no significant differences between children raised by homosexual and heterosexual parents. Now concentration must shift to how lesbian and gay parents cope and fulfill their parental roles in the face of multiple discriminations from both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. A format of focus group discussions is a non-threatening method to determine the level of social changes that lesbian mothers experience after children are added to their families. This study concentrates solely on three lesbian mothers. The participants were solicited through newspaper and bulletin board ads and "snowball" sampling. Major themes that arose include decreased interaction with lesbian social and political groups and increased involvement with institutions defined as heterosexual and other families with heterosexual parents. Given the small nature of the study, the results cannot be generalized but may provide insight into future studies, interventions, and social advocacy on behalf of this group of parents.

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LESBIAN MOTHERS' INTERACTION WITH THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY

Presentation of Problem

The controversy regarding lesbians and gays fulfilling parental roles persists throughout the United States. Society and some individuals question whether or not homosexuals can provide a safe and stable upbringing for the nation's children. Some views even go so far as to claim homosexuals are more likely to molest children or they only want to "recruit" young, impressionable people to the ranks of homosexuality (Martin, 1994).

Overwhelming evidence dating back to the early 1970's refute nearly every claim of negative consequences from homosexual parenting. In fact, most of the studies, although small in nature and not entirely generalizable, indicate that lesbian and gay parented families are equal in almost every aspect to heterosexual models. Often, gay and lesbian parents provide even better conditions for fostering certain positive qualities in their children. This literature review presents a small but representative group of work supporting these ideas.

This thesis addresses the fitness and exceptional parenting abilities of lesbians in spite of the numerous obstacles they encounter in daily interface with the greater heterosexual culture. This thesis also examines some of the specific factors that seem to be prevalent in counteracting positive lesbian family functioning. This work explores the role of lesbian subculture and how it serves to support or oppose the role of lesbian motherhood. Finally, implications for theory and practice will be discussed.

Presentation of Literature

The articles reviewed date as far back as 1977 and continue to as recently as 1997. The types of research and results have remained fairly consistent during the years that have passed. Much of the literature relates to legal issues surrounding custody and adoption by gay and lesbian individuals (Lewis, 1980; Reilly, 1996). Studies will be presented that show no significant differences in the development and well-being of children raised by homosexual parents compared to their counterparts in traditional, heterosexual families.

Demographics. It is very difficult to know exactly how many lesbian headed families exist. Estimates range from 400,000 to 5 million lesbian mothers parenting anywhere from 6-14 million children (Faria, 1994; Hare, 1994; Hare & Richards, 1993; Laird, 1996; Patterson, 1992; Turner, Scadden & Harris, 1990; Van Voorhis & McClain, 1997). This inability to document existence of lesbian families demonstrates the notion of how far outside of mainstream society these families really are. This could be due to the government's refusal to recognize these types of families or a lesbian mother's choice to keep this information private.

Benefits to children. Patterson (1992) presents an extremely comprehensive article of existing literature supporting the effectiveness and positive nature of gay and lesbian families. She conducts no original research but instead, does an excellent job of pulling together a multitude of references to research already in existence. Her historical presentation of the research shows no significant developmental differences between children of homosexual and heterosexual parents.

Interviews with children of lesbians have been a popular method of gathering information about their development (Lewis, 1980; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Some of the studies observed young children and some were directed toward adult children who were looking back on their

formative years. The children or adult children of lesbians who participated showed no differences or social handicaps that could be directly attributed to their mothers' sexual identification.

Hare and Richards (1993) studied birth context and how that may affect father and partner involvement in the child's upbringing. Two interviews were conducted with 28 lesbian couples with children (51 total). Interview one occurred during the Summer of 1991 and took place in the subjects' homes. Interview two followed approximately six months after via telephone. The interview instrument was developed by the researchers specifically for this study as no useful instrument was in existence for this unique group.

The researcher further categorized the children into two separate groups: Those born in the context of a heterosexual relationship (group 1) and those born or adopted into an existing lesbian relationship (group 2). No significant differences were identified between the two groups regarding child development. Differences were detected, however, in the father and partner involvement with the children. Children in group one reported more contact with a father. This was most likely due to the utilization of reproductive technologies such as donor insemination on behalf of group two mothers. Often, the donor is anonymous, so, in essence, there is no father.

In the group two families with no father figure present, partner involvement with the children was slightly higher than group one families. Finally, the researchers found that most of the mothers in group two felt that a male role model was important to the their children's development. A male role model was provided in the form of sperm donor involved after birth, surrogate father, grandfather, or family friend.

It has been found time and time again through exhaustive research that children raised by lesbian mothers and co-parents do not vary in any significant ways from children raised in heterosexual households (Laird, 1993; Laird, 1996; Lewis, 1980; O'Connell, 1993; Patterson, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Turner, Scadden, & Harris, 1990). Of course there are issues surrounding disclosure to peers and feelings of embarrassment among the children as well as fear of persecution on behalf of both the parents and children from society at large. But despite those problems, children of lesbians are shown to have normal development of most key personality traits such as gender identity development and coping mechanisms. Some authors even report exceptional levels of understanding and accepting differences of others among children of lesbians (Hare, 1994; O'Connell, 1993; Patterson, 1992).

Minority Stress and lesbian families. Lesbian mothers are not merely members of a cultural minority group. They could be considered a "triple minority" (Brooks, 1977). First, they are women, a category defined by society as economically and sexually dependent on men. Second, they are members of a socially defined "deviant" group due to their sexual orientation and deprived of societal approval and institutional supports. Finally, they are mothers. This role may serve to divide them even further from their lesbian culture because motherhood is not necessarily widely accepted in lesbian culture. Motherhood requires that lesbians interact with social institutions outside of the lesbian sphere such as schools and social service agencies that may be ignorant or critical of their lifestyles.

A minority group will be defined as "any group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as subjects of collective discrimination" (Brooks, 1977, p. 52). This definition implies that group members recognize that they are treated differently because of their differences. Consequential effects of minority status might lead to unequal legal rights, economic opportunities, and social benefits.

A lesbian mother may feel stigmatized as different from heterosexuals and different from childless lesbians. This fits into the previous definition of a minority and therefore lesbian mothers may experience significant stress related to their status. Possible negative responses to minority stress cited by Brooks (1977) include isolation, identity loss/confusion, self-esteem loss, alienation, role conflict, cognitive dissonance, and psychological disorders.

Other common stressors. Along with the average life-cycle stressors such as aging, parenting, finances, and social relations (Slater & Mencher, 1991), lesbian mothers face a multitude of stressors that stem from the prejudice and oppression they must endure related to judgements others make regarding their sexual orientations (Hall, 1978; Hare, 1994; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; Pies, 1989; Stearns & Sabini, 1997). Same-sex couples and their families may have troubled or non-existent relationships with families of origin. They are not provided legal acknowledgement. They may, in fact, feel forced to hide their lifestyles from co-workers, friends, parents, siblings, and even their own children. These factors can be psychologically damaging to the individual lesbian mother. Finding methods of coping requires creativity, trust, and courage.

Coping in lesbian families. Levy (1983,1992) examined the importance of coping skills for lesbian families. Interviews and questionnaires were utilized to determine what types of coping mechanisms were useful to these families and which weren't. Levy found that the more connected these families were to resources, the more open they could be about their sexual orientation. Social networks in and out of the lesbian community, co-parenting relationships, and development of self/independence affected the families in a positive manner. Items such as hiding lesbian identities, focusing on personal needs, and troubled family of origin relationships had detrimental effects on coping.

In her doctoral dissertation (1983), Levy explores in depth the stressors that lesbian families encounter. She utilizes both Family Stress Theory and Minority Stress Theory but adapts the theories somewhat to fit with the unique circumstances of the lesbian headed family. Lesbian headed families have to deal with the well known life cycle stressors such as welcoming children into the family, children going off to school, children leaving the home, job changes, and obtaining and maintaining a home. All these and more are factors that affect all types of families. Lesbians must cope additionally with these issues within the context of their lesbian identity.

Lesbian families must begin immediately to justify themselves. This is done in two ways: A sub-category called "alternative or non-traditional families" (Pies, 1989) is utilized to differentiate lesbian families from a heterosexual nuclear family. This may serve as a coping mechanism but can also act to stigmatize the families. Secondly, lesbian families must do battle within the established legal system . Since they cannot legally marry, they use routes such as powers of attorney and other legal documents to demonstrate to the world that they are, in fact, a family. This goes a long way to validate these types of families to onlookers. However, since these types of legal proceedings are so new, it is often difficult for lesbian families to get the greater society to honor their wishes (Pies, 1989).

Lesbian community and lesbian mothers. Pisarski and Gallois (1996) contend that many different definitions of "lesbian community" exist. There are several constants in all the definitions including interacting social networks, a group identity based on lesbianism, an institutional foundation of organizations and/or settings for interaction between lesbians, and maintaining similar subcultural values such as feminism. These communities can be perceived as potential sources of support and identity as well as an alternate family unit.

Although lesbian community is often viewed as a positive part of individuals' daily functioning, problems for mothers are also identified. Krieger (1982) found several internal structural problems in lesbian communities including issues of exclusion, alienation, and loss of individual identity within the community. Pies (1988) also states that there is an increasing controversy within the lesbian community regarding lesbians having children. This controversy results simultaneously from a rejection of traditional women's roles including motherhood and a fear of decreased political activism of lesbians who are mothers. Karla Jay (1995) echoes these sentiments and adds that the presence of male children imposes even more debate within lesbian community.

While many lesbian mothers have positive parenting experiences, it is important not to overlook those who struggle with social and legal altercations. Much of the friction can be attributed to heterosexuals who don't understand or tolerate homosexuality. But, awareness is growing about radical and militant lesbians' rejection of motherhood by lesbians. A lesbian mother states, "We have all encountered other lesbians who display, at best, a lack of interest in children, and, at worst, downright hostility towards them, particularly if they happen to be boys " (Aronson, 1996, p. 64). Jo, Strega, and Ruston (1992) go so far as to state that lesbian

motherhood tries to "force Lesbian non-mothers to create Lesbian communities where Lesbian's sons feel comfortable and happy at the expense of girls and adult Lesbians " (p. 5).

From the existing literature, it is clear that there exists a controversy even within the lesbian community about parenting. Knowledge of the specific nature and extent of this controversy might prove useful to lesbian mothers and to social service providers working with lesbian parented families. If some lesbian mothers are, in fact, being ostracized by both the heterosexual and lesbian communities, details of this backlash may help to provide support and advocacy on their behalf.

Review Summary

Of the limited literature reviewed here, all indications are that gay and lesbian parented families differ little from the less disenfranchised heterosexual models. Children are growing up with very similar conditions from economic variations to education to value systems. Children of gay/lesbian parents are less likely to suffer from abuse perpetrated by a family member. Children of lesbians are also no more likely to identify as homosexuals in adulthood than children of heterosexual parents (Hare &

Richards, 1993; Laird, 1993; Laird, 1996; Lewis, 1980; O'Connell, 1993; Patterson, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Turner, Scadden, & Harris, 1990). It seems, then, that it is not the gay and lesbian families that need to be changed but society itself.

One might go so far as to say that children of lesbians fare much better than their counterparts with a traditional heterosexual family. It has been shown that children of lesbians are more tolerant and understanding regarding issues of diversity (Hare, 1994; O'Connell, 1993; Patterson, 1992). Also, in the case of biological children born into lesbian relationships, perhaps the mothers are even more dedicated to being effective parents. They certainly have had to ponder long and hard over their decisions to have children (Laird, 1993; Laird, 1996; Patterson, 1992).

Looking at issues relevant to practice with these families, social workers need to recognize both the similarities and the differences of gay and lesbian parented families. It is important to identify and build on the strengths of the families and the individuals within the families. Usually, when these families seek help it is not for reasons related to their sexuality but for other, common relational and life cycle conflicts (Laird, 1993; Levy, 1983; Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Slater & Mencher, 1991).

A few problems come to mind when examining the existing research. First, there isn't enough of it. It is often difficult to get families to participate in research due to fear of exposure or persecution, time constraints, lack of awareness regarding research, or other reasons. Results from existing research have little or no internal validity. The sampling techniques are most often of a "snow-ball" nature and the samples have characteristically been quite small. These factors impede the abilities of researchers to generalize results to all gay and/or lesbian families. This doesn't, however, mean that the existing data is insignificant.

Finally, the group I really wanted to study is much more specific than gay and lesbian parents. Certainly lesbians have been having children throughout the past but historically children have resulted from heterosexual unions. There is little existing literature on the subgroup of lesbian couples having biological children. I would like to see more research done on the effects of this phenomena, on both the mothers and the children.

Families consisting of lesbian couples and their children certainly fall into the category of "non-traditional families" (a traditional family being defined as two married heterosexual parents with children). It seems

that this focus on their differences is carried even further within the lesbian community itself. If the lesbian community is so fixated on the differences, can it be a source of support for these families? Is the lesbian community supportive, as a whole, of lesbian motherhood? Do lesbian mothers need to turn to the heterosexual community for support and advice? The perceptions and experiences of the lesbian community must be compared and contrasted with those of lesbian mothers to try to answer these questions. If lesbian headed families with children are rejected not only by the greater heterosexual society but also by their own lesbian community, what are the implications for social work practice?

Theoretical Introduction

There is existing research on lesbian families so it stands to reason that many different theoretical approaches are utilized. Those I found to be most prevalent are Systems Theory (Levy, 1983; Slater & Mencher, 1991; Levy, 1992; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1992) which includes both individual, family, and societal systems and cycles. This relates to the interaction between and impact of the systems in relation to one another.

Systems theory framework. Systems theory in social work is derived from knowledge regarding biological systems (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998; Payne, 1997). The idea that biological cells and organs affect one another in a reciprocal manner is translated to an individual and social level. The originator, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, proposed that, indeed, individuals are independent biological and psychological systems. Yet they are also small, interdependent parts of larger systems including families and societies (Payne, 1997). Ecological system theory is a natural expansion that includes environmental influences and societal institutions.

Systems theory addresses the effects of the interaction of the parts of a system as well as the interaction of microsystems (subsystems such as

individuals and families) with macrosystems (institutional systems such as government). It is this interaction between and among the systems that is important to identify to support strengths in the system, and work to change those that do not support growth and development. This is in opposition to the idea of finding an individual problem to lay all blame on for a particular dysfunction.

Nichols & Schwartz (1998) stress the importance of the consideration of values when utilizing a systems perspective. Systems theory allows for individuals to determine the extent to which values are affecting the exchange of information between systems. This is another useful tool for altering the interactions to improve functioning.

In executing this research, I found out how a change in a given family system affects the greater social system and vice-versa. I investigated if, in fact, a change occurs in how the macro-system (lesbian community) behaved toward the micro-culture (lesbian families with children). Interactional changes that occurred in this study pinpointed ways to deal with it on a systems level and create second order change.

In addition, I explored how the family system change (i.e. addition of a child) affects interactions with societal systems. This may be due to normal family development such as with childcare institutions and schools.

Or, a perceived rejection by the greater lesbian community may force lesbian parented families to find alternative resources for support and coping.

It would be impossible to explore this area of research without examining the systems that are in constant interaction. Lesbians may be marginalized by societies rejection of their lifestyles and may have limited resources for social support. Lesbians who have children may be further separated within the lesbian culture. It is important to view their coping on a systemic level because there are multiple forces interacting with them similar to any heterosexual parented family. In addition though, their lesbian identities affect how they look at themselves and how others look at them and this affects their interactions on a basic level.

Cultural considerations. Another area stressed in the literature is a cultural point of view. This includes creation of rituals and values formation (Dilapi, 1989; Modrcin & Wyers, 1990; Nonas, 1991; Depoy & Noble, 1992; Laird, 1994). The researchers discuss how the marginality and rejection of the lesbian family has forced those families to create their own unique rites and cultural norms. The lesbian families have to create their own frames of reference by drawing what they can from the greater heterosexual culture and rejecting what isn't useful.

Stress Theories. Levy (1983) discusses Minority Stress Theory and Family Stress Theory and how it relates to the lesbian family functioning. She utilizes theories primarily from McCubbin (1979) regarding crisis meeting resources and stress in the lesbian family. Finally, several researchers lean toward the use of Strengths Perspective rather than focusing on the shortcomings and problems faced by lesbian families. This is the theoretical background I will be drawing from in my exploration of lesbian families.

Strengths perspective. Laird (1994 &1996) does an excellent job presenting theoretical approaches to family practice with gay and lesbian families. She stresses the Strengths Perspective while taking into account the special issues and hardships that these families face. She presents a case study to help contextualize the theories but no original research is given. Laird shares the existing literature in depth and presents material supporting the idea that no significant differences show up in the children of homosexuals as opposed to heterosexuals.

METHODOLOGY

Research design. I utilized a format of focus groups to collect the data on the previously discussed topic of lesbian motherhood. Ideally, I wanted to run at least two different groups of 6-8 individuals. Each group would have been comprised of individuals and/or couples who had given birth to and/or adopted one or more children. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, I was only able to facilitate one focus group with three individuals who participated. I followed a basic interview guide of topics and/or questions which allowed the participants to maintain control of the discussion. I wanted to act as a facilitator and observer but not a contributor.

Research questions. The broad research questions I addressed were as follows:

1. Do lesbian mothers of biological and/or adopted children perceive a change in attitudes toward them from the lesbian community when they have children?
2. If so, how does this perceived attitude change manifest in behaviors from the greater lesbian culture toward lesbian mothers?

3. If so, how does this perceived attitude change alter interaction with the greater lesbian community?

4. If so, how does this perceived attitude change alter interaction with other social systems outside of the greater lesbian community?

Definitions. For purposes of this research design, I will operationalize some important concepts and terms to provide clearer understanding:

lesbian mother-This refers to either the biological or non-biological female parent of a child born and/or adopted by one or more women.

biological child-A child conceived and birthed by one of the women and parented by one or more mothers. There may be more than one biological child in a family and it is entirely possible that the children may have been carried during pregnancy by different women.

adopted child-A child adopted by a woman and/or her partner .

lesbian culture-This term refers to whom the lesbian mothers consider as friends, colleagues, peers, and references who are themselves lesbians. This includes both organized groups, such as political activists, and informal social groups.

heterosexual culture-This term refers to systems outside of the lesbian culture that lesbian mothers encounter in daily life. Some examples might be employers, schools, hospitals, daycare providers, neighbors, etc.

lesbian family-This term is inclusive not only of the lesbian couple and their children but also extends to families of origin and families of choice as determined by each family unit.

attitude change-This will be experienced by any perceived covert or overt difference in behaviors towards or treatments of the mothers that they attribute to the addition of children to their families.

Characteristics of study population. Members of my research sample met some basic criteria in order to participate in this study. I chose to limit the scope of information gathering to interaction with the parental couples. I did not include any interviews or information obtained from their children. The women were biological and/or adoptive mothers or partner parents of children. The women defined themselves as lesbian mothers. All participants were 21 years of age or older. There were no stipulations regarding race, religion, occupation, economic status, educational status, or political stance.

More specifically, two of the participants were in a committed relationship with each other. They had performed a commitment ceremony three years ago and adopted two children within the past two years. Their children were both under the age of three years at the time of the focus group. The other participant was a non-biological partner parent. Her partner was the biological mother of the child but they had decided mutually to birth a child within the context of their relationship. Although this participant and her partner were no longer together at the time of the focus group, this participant still identified as the child's mother.

Sampling. I utilized three methods to obtain a study population. I placed newspaper ads in lesbian and feminist publications to generate awareness of my study. I also relied heavily on word-of-mouth and snowball sampling through the community and key agencies (Chrysalis, Rainbow Families, Children and Family Services) to obtain a viable study population. Finally, I posted bulletin board advertisements at several metro area sites such as bookstores, coffee shops, and grocery stores.

There was one complication that arose regarding the recruitment phase of this research. Since I was not collaborating with an agency to gather data, I had only my home phone number to use as a contact for interested respondents. This was unacceptable to the IRB, my advisor, and

myself, as listing my home phone number put my own confidentiality and possibly even my safety at risk. Resolution was found in obtaining a voice mailbox on the Augsburg Campus that I could access from anywhere, retrieve messages, and respond to interested parties.

Thirteen individuals responded to my recruitment methods. Two of them had read one of the periodical advertisements. Eight had heard about the project from others. And the remaining three respondents noticed the bulletin board advertisements. Some of the respondents were calling due to their own interest in participation. Others indicated that they may have been able to refer individuals to my study. Five individuals agreed to participate in the study. Upon completion of recruitment, one focus group session was arranged and conducted.

The focus group met on a weekday evening. Three of the five affirmative respondents attended. The chosen site was a conference room at Lindell Library on the Augsburg College campus. I chose this site for several reasons: It was a central location; it was cost effective as there was no fee for the use of the facility for students; and, Information Technology Services was available on-site to provide audiotaping equipment and answer any questions that I had.

There were minor logistical details to consider with the use of this

site for my research. First, explicit directions had to be provided to ensure that the volunteers didn't get lost in the area. Also, I had to provide temporary parking passes to the volunteers as parking can be a problem on campus. I had to make appropriate arrangements with the campus Buildings and Grounds Department for this matter. Finally, some of the volunteers may have been uncomfortable on campus or in the greater neighborhood. This may have been attributable to several different factors including but not limited to one of the participants having been a student at Augsburg at one time.

Measurement issues. Since the study population was very small and not randomly sampled, results from this study cannot be generalized to any population other than the participants. But, the results illuminated possibilities for future research on a larger scale or indications for practitioners of human services. There was a great deal of subjective self-reporting. Some of this self-reporting included trying to remember and relate how one felt in the past so there were some reliability issues present. Also, the data that was collected cannot necessarily be considered a factual truth about the world but instead a glimpse of a few individual's perceptions of their own realities. I was not able to make any definitive reflections on the systems that the lesbian families interact with because I

did not obtain any data from said systems.

Instrumentation. I used a self-composed interview schedule to serve as a guide for the focus group. As I wanted only to facilitate, as opposed to participate in the focus groups, it was impossible to determine prior to the meetings how each question may be answered. The interview schedule was not pre-tested. Since the session was allotted two hours, I decided on eight questions. This allowed for approximately 15 minutes per question.

I was the facilitator of the focus group. I presented the questions orally to the participants and let them take over the interaction at that point. If I felt that the group was getting off track from the specific question, I attempted to bring them back into the specific area of focus. My facilitation relied heavily upon the group dynamic. I did not provide a hard copy of the interview schedule for participants to view prior to the meeting. The meeting was audiotaped.

I seriously considered asking a colleague to co-facilitate the group with me. I thought it could have been useful to have another individual who could track body language and other non-verbal cues that would not show up on an audiotape. If the group had been larger, this would have been a positive addition. I did not write this strategy into my IRB request so I decided not to pursue it.

Data analysis. I transcribed the data into a written transcript format from the audiotape. I researched the cost of employing a professional transcriptionist and decided that since there was only one focus group that I could do it myself. It took me approximately six hours to do the transcription. I then proceeded to analyze the data by looking for themes. From these themes, I created categories that coincide with my major research questions. Qualitative content analysis of the transcripts will follow.

Protection of subjects. I did not foresee any harm to participants in this study. I provided a list of referrals of resources that could be utilized if internal or external conflict occurred as a result of their participation. I found several agencies that deal with lesbian families very effectively (eg. Chrysalis, Rainbow Families, Children and Family Services, etc.) and verified with each agency that their services would be appropriate for this group of individuals.

Strengths and limitations. The main strength of this study was that it allowed women to voice concerns, if any, in a non-threatening environment. I also encouraged the participants to recognize and share each of her strengths to the extent of each individual's comfort level. The information accrued from this study may not be highly representative but it

did give indications as to how service practitioners can work to make things better for individuals and in society in general. It is also possible that it connected the participants to each other and provided a resource for support and coping. The shared stories contributed a rich and, at times, detailed set of thoughts and lent an undertone of the common human experience so useful for qualitative data.

The main limitation of this study was that the information gathered was highly subjective and the data analysis procedures were also subjective. The results had no generalizability. The responses gathered during the focus group represent remembered accounts of the personal experiences of the respondents.

FINDINGS

First of all, it should be noted that the overall tone of the focus group was of a very positive nature. The three individuals who participated were extremely forthcoming with details of their personal lives. The conference room, although somewhat large, was very comfortable. The participants seemed able to develop a rapport very quickly.

There were two additional volunteers that were unable to attend this focus group due to a sudden scheduling conflict. They were both interested in meeting with me at another time but later decided that it would not work out. They told me that one of the primary reasons they had wanted to participate in the focus group was to meet other lesbian mothers. A mutual decision was made that further participation by them would not be beneficial for them or for myself.

Common Themes

Perception of attitudes and behaviors. The three participants did not relate experiences of an overwhelming attitude change from the lesbian

community in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. In fact, one participant stated "...it was really refreshing to come here [Minneapolis] and just find women just hung out and birthed or adopted or whatever." All three of the participants echoed this sentiment about the Minneapolis/St. Paul area being very accepting and affirming within the lesbian community and the non-lesbian community.

One participant did share her experience of having lived in San Francisco: "I would say that I certainly wanted children even before I knew I was a lesbian....so living in San Francisco was difficult. Not that there weren't gay people but not many who wanted families." Later in the discussion she refers to a backlash within the lesbian community: " I think that's true...it's there...but I think it's such a small sector of the [lesbian] community.....There may be some [anti-parenting lesbians] here but I think in San Francisco that was very true."

Another participant noted that at a music festival she attends every year that there is usually a "sector of [non-affirming] lesbians who disapprove of lesbians having children." So, these participants have been exposed to the idea that some lesbians disapprove of child-rearing but it has not come from any of their immediate social circles.

Since there was little personal experience with disapproval from the lesbian community for the study participants, there was not a great deal of discussion about specific behavior manifestations of individuals in the lesbian community that might have indicated disapproval.

Changes in interaction with the lesbian community. The research participants all noted a change in their own behaviors and levels of interaction with the lesbian community. Each one stressed, however, that the changes were due to their own lifestyle changes rather than changes from significant others in their communities. They each cited several lesbian groups that they participate in including:

My daughter and I go to Gay Pride every summer...to parades...we spend the rest of the summer in Michigan and the Women's Music Festival where there happen to be a lot of lesbian moms. It's just a comfortable place to take her...where she can be free to recognize me as lesbian and it doesn't matter, she fits right in.

Another woman stated:

I would say, personally, [participation in gay and lesbian activities] has changed. I mean, we're less inclined to do things that we used to [like] go to Gay Men's Chorus or a lot of things like that. Now we just don't because of time pressure...and also, just ease of making choices

like how many times do you want a babysitter to come...

Comments such as these were echoed among all of the participants. Each one made it clear that her status as a lesbian was less of a factor on the activities than her status as a parent. Their identification as mothers and considerations of their children held more weight in deciding on activities. Activities that they considered family oriented, such as play groups and family picnics, for example, were performed more often than any other type of activities

Multi-community participation. Each participant shared sentiments of feeling like members of several communities. They all had children who were of different races than themselves so they felt it was important to be involved in activities that affirmed their children's racial identity. They also all cited having a solid network of heterosexual friends with children. This facilitated the desire to have peers for their children to interact with. Finally, each respondent cited activities specific to the lesbian community that she was involved in. One respondent stated, "My daughter is African American so I have the cultural aspect to recognize with her." The other two participants echoed this sentiment:

We feel like we straddle that too. We do things with families [of our children's ethnicity] too so we're kind of...are we lesbian? What are

we? So we have that also

Throughout the discussion the term "lesbian mom community" was repeated. I addressed this fact to the group saying, "It's interesting because I hear you all say the lesbian mom community... is that different than the lesbian community...how is that defined?" One participant replied:

I'd say a lot in what the function is or the activity. There are activities that I would go to with other lesbian moms that include children that I wouldn't seek out to go just with another lesbian and vice versa ["mm-hmms" and nods from all participants].

Although, as stated above, the changes that these women experienced were not in their opinions caused by a backlash from the lesbian community, each respondent stated that they did find themselves interacting more with societal institutions defined by them as heterosexual. Two of the women described their experience of finding a pre-school for their oldest child:

We want to make sure that we're choosing schools and living in areas that reflect diversity. And we also think when we look at schools and activities...is it going to be a progressive thinking organization....So in choosing [a] school, we took our sexuality into account.

They concluded this topic with the positive report that they did indeed find a school that they were happy with and had dealt with gay and lesbian

parents before.

Being “out” in public. One respondent shared her dilemma of how to come out in her workplace. She knew that before she brought children into her family that she would have to come out and she stated that, at the time, she just wasn't ready. So, she quit that job and went to work somewhere she felt she could be more open. As it turned out, after adopting her two children, she went back to work for the previous employer and found the organization to be very accepting and affirming of her.

One respondent related an incident that occurred in her daughter's school:

My daughter's current teacher would not recognize that she has two moms. It was difficult. It made her make the decision who she was going to make a card for. She could only make one and it was really difficult for her. She came home from school just devastated. It just put her in a really difficult situation.

Support from families of origin and choice. All of the participants shared very positive experiences regarding each of her family's responses to child-rearing. They each stated that the grandparents were all very involved. In all three cases, each respondent's father (the grandfathers) was the primary male role model for their children. There were also some

uncles and male family friends that had positive interactions with the children.

Looking toward the future. Toward the end of our conversation, I asked the question "Is it important to you that there are other lesbian moms out there that you can connect with?" This question seemed to provoke deep thought for a few moments. One woman responded:

That's a great question. I guess I'm not sure if it is. Because we haven't had to deal with...I've heard different things from different parents who have kids that are older. That some of the kids need to be around families [like ours]....and you hear it from Rainbow Families and literature...so I anticipate it. We haven't had much experience talking with parents of older children so we don't know what will happen.

Essentially, what this respondent said was that she thought her children would indicate what their needs were as they got older. She anticipated that her children would desire exposure to other children of lesbian and/or gay parents to reassure them that there were others like them. Another participant whose daughter was almost eight years old stated that she is just beginning to experience some of those struggles of her daughter feeling different from other kids.

It was obvious that all three respondents felt the need for their children to be validated. The main question was when they would have to take a more active role in that. And then what followed was the question of how to do that and what resources would be available to them within the context of their overall community. One woman summed this idea up:

...When you have kids it's more likely that you make community within your community and if there happen to be other lesbian moms within the neighborhood, which there are a couple for me, that's who we form friendships with and do things with.

DISCUSSION

Strong community and support systems. From the responses of the participants of the focus group, I concluded that none of the three felt significantly affected in a conscious manner of stress due to their lifestyles. A feeling was conveyed however regarding feeling different. Each respondent stated that she was very conscious about how the choices she made might affect her children. Each person made it clear that she always wanted to act in the best interest of her child and consistent awareness and effort was required to achieve this. It could be concluded from the information gathered that, indirectly, these women do experience a degree of minority stress simply because they are almost continually conscious of their status as lesbians.

The data collected from this study refuted a trend of rejection by each respective identified lesbian community of the participants. The three respondents indicated that they did indeed interact more with heterosexual individuals and institutions but it was because of their status as parents (taking on a new role) rather than a perceived rejection from their identified lesbian communities (eliminating an established role). It would be interesting to see what results manifested with a larger group of

respondents.

Family life cycle theory. All of the respondents indicated that they felt that their children's presence had an impact on the choices they made regarding social and political activities. They stated that they gravitated toward more family oriented activities out of a desire to do things with their children. This is a frequent theme that arises in family life cycle theory. Many parents, both heterosexual and homosexual, may experience a normal shift in types of activities simply because they have added children into the family equation. It becomes necessary to consider which activities the children can attend, which ones they cannot, and how to handle those situations when they arise.

Institutional interaction. The situation related by one of the respondents concerned her daughter's teacher refusing to acknowledge that one of her students came from a non-traditional family (had two moms). The respondent indicated that she felt she had done everything in her power to make the situation easier for this particular teacher. Unfortunately, the respondent found no support from the teacher, the school, or the district. She indicated that she had given up and was waiting to see what would happen next year. This demonstrates the inability of some professionals in the heterosexual community to recognize and support individuals who are

from non-traditional families.

Strengths perspective and systems theory integrated. It was clear from the respondents' willingness to share their experiences and the descriptions of the experiences themselves that these three women hold within themselves a great deal of strength. They each related stories of successes and hardships. Yet they each had strong support systems of family, friends, colleagues, and institutional support. It was demonstrated through the dialogue that each of these three participants did, in fact, find strength in their surroundings despite, or perhaps because of, their unique situations.

Suggestions for future research. It would be useful to repeat this inquiry under its original format of at least two focus groups. If it were possible to conduct more than two groups, a future researcher would gather some useful data. The three participants of my study expressed gratitude to me and praised the program for encouraging study into this area. Given their willingness and the input from others who didn't participate in the actual focus group, I think there is a potentially sizeable number of people who would be willing to participate in a future discussion. In recognition of the strengths presented in both the literature review and by the participants of this study, future research should focus on those things that support and

encourage lesbian families.

In regard to the measurement instrument (see appendix for sample), the interview schedule was adequate. It would be useful to rethink and revise some of the questions before facilitating any more groups. In analyzing the transcript of the discussion, it is possible that some follow up questions might be added to the formal questionnaire. Finally, any future researcher will want to weigh the pros and cons of obtaining more demographic data.

Possible implications for social work. The results of this study gave no indication that these lesbian mothers felt cut-off from their lesbian communities because of their children. Social workers could choose to take that into consideration when trying to help lesbian families cope in the future. The three respondents did not, however, provide evidence in their personal accounts of a significant struggle with any issues related to each of her parenting and identified lesbian communities.

The results refute ideas of rejection from the lesbian community. This is based on such a small sample that it cannot be generalized outside of this specific group. This would not necessarily mean that the rejection does not exist because, as stated earlier, this sample was not representative. Professionals in the community may be able to examine

how the lesbian community is working here and transpose the ideas to communities that are looking for resolutions.

Social workers who work with these families certainly need to pay special attention to the unique circumstances of lesbian parented families. Social workers must assume the responsibility to be aware of historical influences as well as current trends in theory and policy regarding lesbians and lesbian communities. Initiative must be taken by social workers to promote social action and social justice in cooperation with lesbian individuals and communities.

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MEMO

February 5, 1999

TO: Ms. Victoria Grimm

FROM: Dr. Lucie Ferrell, IRB Chair

RE: Your Institutional Review Board Application

Thank you for your response to the outcome of review. You have met the conditions for approval and may now begin your research: IRB approval number 99-10-3. Please use that number on all official documents and correspondence relative to your study.

Your research should prove very valuable and we wish you every success.

LF:lmn

c: Ms. Maria Brown

SEEKING

**Lesbian moms to
participate in a group
discussion of strengths
& concerns. Grad
student research.**

**Please call Victoria @
612-330-1558.**

Confidential.

**Leave message-all
inquiries answered.**

Statement of Informed Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project on "Lesbian mothers' interaction with the lesbian community" that is being conducted by Victoria Grimm from Augsburg College.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to hold a group interview to find out about experiences of lesbian mothers and relationships in the lesbian community; we will discuss our general ideas about the topic cited above. The researcher wishes to explore lesbian motherhood and its possible effects on the relationship between each of you and the greater lesbian community. The researcher hopes to gain and ultimately provide insight into the relationship between individuals and their communities, specifically lesbian mothers and the lesbian community. The researcher also hopes to enhance understanding of the exceptional circumstances faced by lesbian mothers.

I understand that the study involves a focus group interview that lasts two hours or less, which will be audiotaped.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that if I wish to withdraw from the study or to leave, I may do so at any time, and that I do not need to give any reasons or explanations for doing so. If I do withdraw from the study, I understand that this will have no effect on my relationship with Augsburg College or any other organization or agency.

Because of this study, there could be violations of my privacy. To prevent violations of my own or others' privacy, I will be asked not to talk about any of my own or others' private experiences that I would consider too personal or revealing.

I also understand that I have an obligation to respect the privacy of the other members of this group by not disclosing any personal information that they share during our discussion.

I understand that all the information I give will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law, and that the names of all the people in the study will be kept confidential.

I understand that I may not receive any direct benefit from participating in this study, but that my participation may help others in the future.

I understand that in the event that I experience discomfort or distress following my participation, I can call any of the agencies provided by the researcher on a referral information form.

I understand that I may request a copy of this consent form for my records.

I understand that my participation may be terminated by the researcher if said researcher considers my security at risk.

The researcher, Victoria Grimm, has offered to answer any questions I may have about the study and what I am expected to do.

I consent to the audiotaping of myself for the purposes of this study.

Your Signature

Today's Date

I give permission to the researcher to quote me in the research report with the understanding that I will not be identified in the report.

Your Signature

Today's Date

If you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact either Victoria Grimm at 612-330-1558 or Maria Brown at 612-330-1771 on the Augsburg College campus.

REFERRALS

If you experience any discomfort or distress as a result of your participation in this focus group please call any of the numbers listed below for services. Services may be subject to a fee which you will be responsible for.

1. Chrysalis Center for Women, Minneapolis, 612-871-2603.
2. Community Family Counseling Clinic, Plymouth, 612-545-7907.
3. Out Front Minnesota (formerly GLCAC), Minneapolis, 612-822-0127.
4. Community University Health Care-Mental Health-Community Services, Minneapolis, 612-627-6888, ext. 209.

I have read and understand this information and I agree to take part in this study.

Your Signature

Today's Date

Investigator's Signature

Today's Date

Victoria L. Grimm

"Lesbian mothers' interaction with the lesbian community"

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Task 1: Sign consent/release forms. Reiterate that session will be audiotaped.

Task 2: Welcome and begin

Item 1: Again, thank you all for coming and agreeing to share your knowledge and experience with myself and eachother. I would like to begin by getting to know eachother a little bit so if you would, introduce yourselves and share whatever you feel comfortable with about your families.

Item 2: Please describe the activities that you participate in that you consider to be related to your sexual identity as a lesbian. This can include political or action groups, social groups, work groups, etc.

Item 2.5: Have these activities changed in frequency and/or intensity since the births of your children ?

Item 3: Please describe the processes you went through in thinking about and, ultimately, having children.

Item 4: How have people around you responded to your decision to have children?

Item 5: Do you think that you relationships with others in the lesbian community have changed since your children were born?

Item 5.5: Describe specific behaviors directed toward you that have made you feel supported or rejected.

Item 6: Does being a parent give you a greater sense of connection to heterosexual culture?*

Item 6.5: Have you found yourselves interacting more frequently with institutions or individuals in the heterosexual culture than you did before you had

children?

Item 7: How do you think the lesbian baby boom, that is, a trend towards biological lesbian parented families, impact on the lesbian community and on the wider world?*

(*)=These items were written using information from Karla Jay's book, Byke Life which is cited in the references.

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